DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 200 985 CS 206 256

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TITLE How Can a Major in Composition Be Established? Suggestions through the Sunshine and Shadows of Seventy Years' Experience at DePauw University.
PUB DATE Mar 81
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (32nd, Dallas, TX, March 26-28, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College English; *Degrees (Academic); *English Curriculum; Higher Education; *Majors (Students); Program Descriptions; *Program Development; *Writing (Composition)
IDENTIFIERS DePauw University IN

ABSTRACT

The English program at DePauw University (Greencastle, Indiana) has undergone many changes. Today, English majors at DePauw may choose from either a literature or a composition course of study. The capstone course in the 70-year-old composition program is the seminar, in which students write whatever they choose and distribute copies to the other members of the seminar, who write critiques of the work. Other courses offered include expository and creative writing, criticism, linguistics, and newswriting. Over the years, enrollment in the composition curriculum has been high compared to that of the literature program. The advantages of offering a composition degree program far outweigh the disadvantages, particularly since such a program is designed to fit the needs of individual students and offers scholarships and apprenticeships for journalism and creative writing. The DePauw Program illustrates that a school committed to developing a composition degree program must have sufficient qualified staff, should phase in the program gradually, should invite successful writers to present lectures to composition students, and should secure recognition on the part of other departments of the need for a university-wide emphasis on composition. (HTH)

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# HOW CAN A MAJOR IN COMPOSITION BE ESTABLISHED? SUGGESTIONS THROUGH THE SUNSHINE AND SHADOWS OF SEVENTY YEARS' EXPERIENCE AT DEPAUW UNIVERSITY

Arthur W. Shumaker

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How Can a Major in Composition Be Established? Suggestions Through the Sunshine and Shadows of Seventy Years' Experience at DePauw University

Paper Read at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Dallas, Texas, March 27, 1981.

by Arthur W. Shumaker

Perilous indeed is the road which anyone must travel when he speaks of the writing program of his own college or university.

He opens himself to the possible accusation that he is attempting to beat the drum and to advertise the alleged merits of his own school and those of his own department of English, or, the very worst of all, to present himself in something of a blaze of glory.

Difficult as it may be, I hope that I can avoid, in this paper, all these pitfalls and accomplish what I truly desire--namely, to present the writing program and, particularly, the major in composition at one University as it has existed for over 70 years and especially as it stands today, together with its principal advantages and pitfalls. My purpose--and I hope it will sound credible to your ears--is simply to show that a major in composition is not only possible in a large number of colleges and universities, both small and large, private and state-supported, but also that if members of an English department desire it enough, the chances are good that a major in composition can be initiated and can be made a successful part of the curriculum offerings. Probably such a program can be created without too much of a major dislocation or upheaval. Indeed, perhaps without <u>any</u> such fearful changes.

The origin of this paper lies in the fact that for a number of years when I have attended the annual meetings of the CCCC I have been involved in workshops or discussions about creative writing, and some-

times in these discussions the fact has emerged that DePauw University not only has a major in composition but that it has had such a major for a long time and, moreover, that the English Department considers it a successful major. Such a declaration on my part has usually been met with any of four reactions, such as a stony stare, by means of which the starer seemed to say, "So what?" Or, an expression of mild but passing interest on the part of the hearer. Or, enthusiasm that such a program exists either in my university or elsewhere. Or, lastly, an expression of utter disbelief that such a major could actually be accomplished--or, indeed should be created. My masculine intuition tells me that perhaps all four reactions may be present in this audience today.

At any rate, what I hope to do now is to approach the subject in four ways: first, to give a brief history of the major in composition at DePauw University; second, to describe the major as it stands today; third, to set forth the advantages and disadvantages of this major; and, fourth and last, to tender a few observations about how other schools can possibly establish a major in composition if they desire it.

First, then, the history of this major.

DePauw University, founded in 1837, lays claim to the title of University by virtue of having three schools--a College of Liberal Arts, a School of Nursing, and a Music School--with the College of Liberal Arts being by far the largest of the three. The entire University now has about 2300 students, about 145 full-time faculty members, 13 full-time members of the Department of English and 8 part-time members.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century English composition was taught but often was not separated from English literature

and rhetoric. After 1896 English literature was separated from English Composition and rhetoric, but until 1907 oratory was considered to be a part of rhetoric and composition. From 1907 to 1916 there was a department of English Composition and Rhetoric, and during that time courses in journalism were introduced; and the Alpha chapter of Sigma Delta Chi, the now national journalistic society, was founded. Thus, interest in writing was increasing in the University. In 1916 Professor Raymond W. Pence became head of the Department and breathed new life into it. He immediately started publishing textbooks in composition, particularly for freshmen, and stressed the need for good, accurate composition in all the academic fields and for all the ordinary purposes of life. Since the textbooks were successful and the students coming from the required freshman English courses proved themselves to be good writers in other academic fields as well, composition soon attained the status of a subject that was very respectable academically, and a major in composition was made secure. Just how and when the major was begun is lost in the vagaries of the phraseology of the old college catalogues, which are not always specific on such points. It may be that the major is more like 100 years old. A somewhat competitive department was that of English Literature, but each department allowed its majors to count some courses in the other department on their own majors, and the two departments plus the Department of Comparative Literature were combined into a Department of English in the mid 1930's. The majors both in English literature and composition were retained, and the student majoring in English could take his choice. In the early 1950's a third possible major was added, that of American literature, though it lasted for only a few years; and these majors have continued up till today. They are now called simply a ma-

jor in literature and a major in composition.

In 1916-1917, the first year that Professor Pence was on the Faculty, the following courses in composition were listed in the catalogue: Freshman English (2 semesters), Advanced Composition (2 semesters), Business Writing (2 semesters), Advanced Business English, Newspaper Writing (2 semesters), The Essay, The Short Story and Dramatic Composition (2 semesters), The Teaching of English, Verification, Seminarium in Advanced Rhetoric, and Seminarium in Advanced Composition. Although there have been many changes in the curriculum since 1916-1917, the pattern of composition courses has remained much the same.

In about the last thirty years there have never been more than two courses in journalism, and yet a large number of the composition majors have gone into professional journalism. Evidently the other writing courses helped develop their general writing ability.

The capstone course in the composition major, however, was always the seminar, which could be taken for two full years with credit. Here the junior or senior student wrote pretty much what he wished, particularly the short story, although he could also venture into description, autobiography, different types of expository material, or even begin a novel. Indeed, a number of novels were begun in the seminar--but proved to be such long and arduous jobs that if finished, as a number of them were, they were completed after the student was graduated. The method usually used in class was to have each student read to the others samples of his work and then for the class to criticize. Today each student mimeographs a story or some other sample of writing and distributes it to the other members of the seminar, who are then required to turn in written critiques of this work. Thus,

something of a critical ability on the part of the students has been developed. The seminar in composition came to have such good repute that after a time senior majors in other fields were accepted as members if those students could show evidence of an ability and a strong interest in writing. It was not unusual, therefore, to find among the composition majors taking the seminar two to four majors in chemistry or history or psychology. And some of these foreigners turned in very respectable performances too.

It is interesting to observe that whereas the English faculty have made many changes in the requirements for majors in literature, either English or American, over a period of years, comparatively few changes have been made in the requirements for the major in composition. The composition major today is essentially what it was some thirty or forty years ago. Perhaps this fact can be interpreted as indicating a lack of initiative and a failure to progress and to change with the times. Or, on the other hand, it may indicate that there is no sense in jerking a winning team off the field and sending in what may prove to be second-rate substitutes.

Enrollments in the three different English majors have been curious to analyze. For example, the last decade shows that the majors in literature have varied from 43 in 1970-71 to a low of 18 in 1980-81. And the majors in composition have ranged from 13 in 1970-71 to a high of 26 in 1979-80; this year we have 25. Thus, the composition major has been holding up well.

What is the status of the composition major today? The following courses in composition are offered: Basic Writing, Expository Writing, Advanced Expository Writing, Creative Writing I, and Creative Writing II (which is broken down into four parts: fiction, playwriting, verse writing, and the essay), The Development of Modern English (a course

more in linguistics on the undergraduate level than in composition), News Writing and Editing (the only course now given in journalism), Teaching Methods in English, and English Grammar (these last two courses being composition courses only in part), Independent Writing (a course for seniors who work under a faculty member in a chosen field), Seminar: Theory and Practice of Criticism, and finally the Seminar in Composition, which is still the capstone course for the major. Consequently, there are two composition courses on the freshman level, four on the sophomore level, one on the junior level, and five on the senior level--12 courses in all, of which 9 are courses completely in composition and 3 of which are directed only partly to composition. Also, a number of courses during the January Winter Term are writing courses, and we offer several off-campus apprenticeships in writing, editing, and publishing.

The present requirements for the major in composition are as follows: Introduction to Poetry; Introduction to Fiction or Introduction to Drama; 3 courses in composition above the 100 level: the Development of Modern English; 2 courses in elective literature; and the senior Seminar--9 courses in all (36 semester hours).

But, you may ask, just what kinds of students take the major in composition? Four main types, I believe. First, the very talented student, who really wants to learn to write and who quite possibly comes to college with notebooks full of poems, stories, descriptions, and the like that he has done in high school or on his own outside class either in high school or college. He wants to become a writer, and on the road to his goal he displays both ability and dedication. The chances are at least fair that following graduation he will get into some sort of writing. In the second place, we have many students who

want to enter journalism. They vary much in ability, but most of them will work hard enough to achieve their goal even if it means that they become low-salaried reporters on newspaper beats. Third, students who are only average--or less--in ability but who have so much motivation that they revise and revise enough that they have a chance of doing something in writing after they graduate--although they may very well end in going into their fathers' businesses after all. Fourth and last we have our own quota of deadheads--deadheads either because of lack of ability or lack of motivation. In either case they neither graduate with laurels, nor do they publish later the great American novel. I often wonder what becomes of them. In the last two years the teachers of advanced composition have been screening candidates for the major by interviewing them before agreeing to become their advisers.

Having now considered the history of the major in composition at DePauw University and the status of the major today, let us next turn to what may be termed advantages--or, perhaps, characterizations--of the composition major at this University.

First, it has always aimed principally at composition for the ordinary purposes of life. Therefore, the skills and habits fostered have been useful in many other academic areas and in non-academic areas as well.

Second, the sheer drudgery of attaining mechanical accuracy, using outlines, and revising continually has always been stressed.

Third, the program has never been a lockstep. It has always been designed to fit the needs of the individual student.

Fourth, the Department has never promised anything to the student. If after graduation he does become a successful writer, journalist, or whatever, it is up to him to achieve his own success.

Fifth, a long tradition of having an independent college newspaper has encouraged students and has provided an immediate outlet for their writings. Scholarships for aspiring journalists are available, and the Kilgore Counselor Program provides for two professional journalists in the course of a year to spend two weeks each on the campus and help the staff of the student newspaper by offering professional advice.

Sixth, if the student shows promise in journalistic or creative writing, he may apprentice himself for a semester in his junior year to appropriate journals, newspapers, and editors through programs called the New York Arts Program and the Philadelphia Urban Semester.

Seventh, as before noted, the senior seminar in composition has often admitted senior majors from other departments, and this fact has attracted some attention to the major program in composition.

Eighth, we have found that a major in composition may well come to understand himself better, because often he has to turn inward in search of subjects and insights.

Ninth, a curious aspect of this major lies in the fact that new members of the English Department have not tended to want to make changes in the composition major the same as they have desired to tinker with the major in literature. This is one reason why we feel that the composition major stands up rather well.

Tenth, since there is so much writing going on among students, the faculty members of the English Department are placed in the position of having to keep up with the students.

Eleventh, the faculty of other University departments and also persons outside this University have long tended to recognize that composition has considerable value in their own fields. Several years ago the dean of the medical school at Indiana University had a bronze plaque

placed in the University library in appreciation of the value of a thorough training in English composition, such as that being given in the University, to medical doctors.

Twelfth, many of the majors in composition have also qualified for high-school teaching licenses, and for several generations we have had the satisfaction of seeing them hired by school officials expressly to teach composition. Then these teachers, in turn, tend to kindle in their high-school students an interest in writing which leads them to enroll in DePauw University or in some other school offering advanced composition. Thus, the writing program tends somewhat to perpetuate itself.

Thirteenth, although the stress has never been on composition for professional writing, still many of our graduates have gone directly--or, indirectly--into professional production. However, we should hasten to warn any person interested that we would not claim that any Shakespeares, Melvilles, or Hemingways exist among our alumni.

Fourteenth, and last, the staff has been alert to using writing skills in the electronic media, such as screen and television.

Now, after giving such a long list of characteristics, or, advantages, of the composition major, I should hasten to point out at least a few disadvantages of it.

First, as I have said before, we do get some deadheads in this program. Either they are conscientious and simply don't have what it takes to succeed, or else they hope that this is an easy major. Sympathy and as much help as possible--perhaps more of the former than the latter--is about all that we can give these people.

Second, occasionally composition majors tend to avoid taking literature courses, evidently thinking that they prefer not to be in-

fluenced by a dead past, but that rather they want to become geniuses by feeding upon themselves. Of course, they fail to recognize the fact that good writing is composed at least 50% of good reading. It is for this reason that we require a minimum of four courses in literature as part of the composition major.

Third, sometimes a major in composition has trouble in finding a vocation. If he does not go into teaching or journalism, the only alternatives are either to starve in a garret while collecting rejection slips or else to try something like advertising or work in a publishing house. Of course, some of these majors end up in lines of work that have little or nothing to do with writing.

Having examined the advantages and disadvantages of the composition major, as my last item in this discourse I would like to be so bold as to offer a few suggestions to any schools that are considering trying to establish a major in composition.

First of all comes the necessary desire on the part of an English Department really to establish such a major. If too many members of the Department are afraid of the idea because they think that neither they nor anyone can really teach writing, or, if they feel that it would possibly prove to be a threat to entrenched courses in literature, obviously no major will be created.

Second, once the commitment to establish this major has been made, sufficient staff qualified to teach composition must be provided. Unfortunately, the usual training of undergraduate majors in literature has too often been a single, rather frustrating and unsuccessful course in Freshman English, if that much. And many persons who today hold the Ph.D. have been exposed to only that one course. Probably such a professor is not the best of all prospects to teach advanced

courses in writing. Perhaps the best teacher of advanced composition courses is one who as an undergraduate took such courses himself and excelled in them and who also preferably has an interest in, and some experience in, such writing, both expository and imaginative. Sometimes professional writers make good teachers of advanced composition, but often they prove to be strongly uncommunicative orally and impatient with students, whom they have little desire or ability to understand.

Third, once a school has the instructors, it would probably do well to edge into such a program gradually if at present it has few or no courses in advanced composition. Perhaps a course in expository writing, one in imaginative (or creative) writing, and one in journalism would be good points of departure. If a school now has a few such courses, it might be wise to add more only as the interest and need develop, being sure that they increase in difficulty and in introducing distinctive literary types, such as poetry, drama, and the essay, and culminating in a seminar.

Fourth, as we all know, inviting successful writers to lecture to your composition students and perhaps, if arrangements can be made, to address a university convocation is a successful manner of giving the composition program a series of shots in the arm.

Fifth, and last, see whether, by means fair or foul, you can secure better recognition on the part of colleagues in other departments of the need for good writing. The introduction of a university-wide emphasis on composition is a goal to be hoped for.

In conclusion, I should point out that what all this discussion boils down to is that several schools, such as my own, have established a seemingly successful major in composition and have produced a number

of writers of all degrees of merit, high and low. Undoubtedly some of the wretched writing of today has had its genesis in such majors, and I suppose that composition majors from my own school have had their share in such an unfortunate production. But also a large amount of what most people seem to agree is quality writing has been produced, and I hope that we have had a share in this happier contribution. In addition, other colleges and universities of different sizes and types can also establish such majors if they have sufficient desire and means to work at the project. In such a possible endeavor I wish you the best of luck.